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Book Review: Irruptive Discourse and Conflicted Curiosity :  
Merrill Kaplan, Thou Fearful Guest: Addressing the Past in Four  
Tales in Flateyjarbók, 2011

Frog, Etunimetön

2013

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Frog , E 2013 , ' Book Review: Irruptive Discourse and Conflicted Curiosity : Merrill Kaplan,  
Thou Fearful Guest: Addressing the Past in Four Tales in Flateyjarbók, 2011 ' , Elore , vol.  
20 , no. 1 , pp. 252-256 .

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<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/40013>

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ELORE (ISSN 1456-3010), vol. 20 – 1/2013.

Julkaisija: Suomen Kansantietouden Tutkijain Seura ry.

[[http://www.elore.fi/arkisto/1\\_13/frog.pdf](http://www.elore.fi/arkisto/1_13/frog.pdf)]



## BOOK REVIEW

### IRRUPTIVE DISCOURSE AND CONFLICTED CURIOSITY

MERRILL KAPLAN 2011: *Thou Fearful Guest: Addressing the Past in Four Tales in Flat-eyjarbók*. Folklore Fellows' Communications 301. Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica. 236 pages.

#### Frog

Developed from the author's doctoral dissertation (University of California, Berkeley, 2006), *Thou Fearful Guest* seeks to illuminate "signs of a very conscious and conflicted curiosity" (p. 189) of authors and audiences in medieval Iceland about the heritage of a pre-Christian past. This is explored through four narratives presenting Odinic inhabitants of that past entering the presence of King Óláfr Tryggvason and King Óláfr the Saint – the two kings central to the Christianization of that cultural area – and telling stories of that era. The work is constructed according to an elegant symmetry of three sections containing two, three and two chapters each, all framed by a prologue and epilogue. Rather than chasing the ghosts of bygone myths from manuscripts into the shadows of prehistory, or tracking medieval works on their transformational journeys through labyrinths of unnumbered copies, this work is characterized by context as the key to understanding the mirroring manifestations of text production in the past, and the context of these narratives is the manuscript *Flat-eyjarbók*.

The central concern of the study is uses of narrative embedding or metanarration in encounters and confrontations with history and heritage that is ideologically dislocated

from the (Christian) scribe or narrator. Although the specific material is medieval, the negotiation of the past in the present will have wider appeal. The book is written in a colourful and engaging style, making use of metaphor for ornamentation as well as in analytical description of poetry, narratives and knowledge as cultural ‘goods’. The goods-metaphor is developed through parallels and connections between narratives and material objects or features of the landscape. ‘Old goods’ are distinguished from ‘relics’ when approaching the reuse of ‘old goods’ that have become ideologically disjointed from the present of text (re)production. Interpenetration of temporal orders is approached in dialogue with the medieval concept of ‘typology’. This volume offers a number of interesting insights and perspectives on different topics, addressing the analysed material in new ways while offering some fresh perspectives on certain aspects of Old Norse culture and some of its sources.

## THE WORK

The four narratives concerned are stories of an Odinic figure or Odin himself appearing as a ‘guest’ of one of the great conversion kings who tells entertaining stories about the great heroic past. These four narratives are revealed to present a striking symmetry of Man–Odin–Odin–Man:

1. A 300-year-old guest with relics of pagan heroes narrates first-hand knowledge of the mytho-heroic past, is baptized and dies (*Nornagests þátttr*). 2. The Fiend disguised as Odin visits the king in Qgvaldsnes, narrates about the burial mound of King Qgvaldr, enthralls the king with stories and leaves spiritually tainted meat; in a supplementary narrative, a sorcerer’s magic backfires in a plot against the king. 3. The Fiend disguised as Odin enthralls the king with stories of ancient kings and tempts him to identify himself with one of them (i.e. with a pagan); the king tries to strike the Fiend with a holy book; in a supplementary narrative, a man sees the mound of Óláfr Geirstaðaálfr and asks the king whether he had once expressed identification with that pagan king. 4. A guest who has lived two lifetimes compares the courts of great pagan kings that he had visited, is baptized and dies in his baptismal gown (*Tóka þátttr Tókason*).

Stories 1–2 are found at the end of the saga about King Óláfr Tryggvason while stories 3–4 are at the beginning of the saga of King Óláfr the Saint. Between the sagas of these two Óláfrs is a story about a pagan King Óláfr Geirstaðaálfr who, following his death, played an essential (supernatural) role in enabling the birth of Óláfr the Saint. Stories 1–3 occur at Christmas or Easter, inviting comparison with mumming traditions. Some of these stories have received little scholarly attention and they have not been previously treated as a complex set within the strategy of manuscript compilation. It is argued that the four stories “describe an arc familiar to anyone who has ever told or heard a story: situation–complication–conflict–resolution” (p. 193). All four stories tend to be addressed more or less in sequence in each thematic chapter. The discussion thus proceeds in an elegant spiral as each narrative and the progression of four is approached from different angles, theme by theme, in reinforcing analyses. One consequence of this strategy

is distributed argumentation for the interpretation of each narrative and for certain topics. These are gradually resolved across the series of treatments, but there are occasional tensions where distributed argumentation may not appear entirely unified, carried to a final resolution, or connections across material or its relevance remains implicit.

## TEMPORAL DISORDER AND IRRUPTIONS

The first chapter opens with a discussion of the significance of temporal order within the medieval Icelandic Christian worldview. The problem of ordering time provides a springboard for criticizing scholars' tendency to separate synchronic material according to artificially constructed cultural periods such as 'pagan' and 'Christian'. The term and concept 'irruption' is employed to adjust consideration to a synchronic temporal sphere in which 'pagan' and 'Christian' meet. A construed temporal order of periods remains fundamental to discussion insofar as irruptions are correlated with temporal disorder. Irruption is used especially to approach narrative goods (and by extension material objects and landscape features associated with narrative goods) of the vernacular heathen past into the world order of a Christian society. These goods are temporally dislocated from the Christian present and threaten temporal disorder. These irruptions are differentiated from irruptions of the past or the mythic world lacking this tension (cf. pp. 160–161). Although Odin and the Odinic figures here have a continuity from the heathen past, that continuity, like perceived continuities of material objects and the landscape, is addressed with regard to constructing authority, authenticity and the negotiating truth (pp. 99–127), not as irruption. Focus on narrative as irruption also seems to account for the absence of certain materials from discussion that might otherwise seem relevant, such as *Helga þáttur Þórissonar* ('The Story of Helgi, Þórir's Son'), also in the *Flateyjarbók* manuscript, in which two uninvited guests with Odin-pseudonyms visit Óláfr Tryggvason at Christmas from a pre-Christian otherworld kingdom with objects that *become* worthy of narration, but these guests do not offer narrative goods or otherwise narrate the past in the story's ideological conflict.

## TYPOLGY

The medieval concept of 'typology' is employed as a central tool in discussion. This sort of typology is the emergence of personal identities, images, events, narrative patterns, etc., identified according to symbolic-structural types that are prefigured and recurrent through history. Typology is rooted in Biblical exegesis but has been considered a universal of human culture. In principle, typology is a form of intertextuality through which an event in the present or in history is informed with meanings, valuations and authority through identification with a mythological, mythic or historical model (potentially involving a reinterpretation or revaluation of that perceived model). In the study under discussion, this tool is used, for example, to explore potential typological

systems surrounding the multiple King Óláfrs (e.g. p. 203), recurrent symbolism of ordering time in accounts in *Íslendingabók* ('The Book of Icelanders') (pp. 40–48), the engagement of a heathen world-creation narrative in King Ógvaldr's burial with his cow in the Ógvaldsnes episode (pp. 146–148), and typology is used effectively to approach the threat of admitting "Óðinn into a system of typology from which medievals were probably keen to exclude him" (p. 179).

The identification and distinction of particular types nevertheless remains undeveloped. Identifying structural plot-types is initially considered "the wrong tool" for approaching Old Norse material because it does not address its "*heaped-up-ness*", which is the focus of this particular study (p. 50). This is a reaction against earlier scholarship with a reconstruction-oriented diachronic emphasis. Associated methods, research questions and diachronic research with different methodological perspectives are dismissed as a package (pp. 48–50). This is attributable to a concern that any consideration of the development of different structural types will reduce examples to text-object relics isolated to an artificially segregated period (pp. 173–175). Structural types could nevertheless have provided a complementary tool to 'typology', enabling, for example, a distinction between two plot-types of encounters (1 and 4 distinguished from 2 and 3) to consider the second King Óláfr's stories 3 and 4 as potentially typological engagements of the first Óláfr's stories 2 and 1, respectively. Typology is a relationship of prefiguration and recurrence across exemplars. Acknowledging structural-semantic plot-types beyond an ambiguous Odinic guest-situation (cf. pp. 54–56) would also allow situational semantics of the narrative patterns to be engaged as socially meaningful independent of a temporal hierarchy. The tension surrounding cases where, "Disturbingly [...] the kings resemble Óðinn" (p. 200), could then have been negotiated in terms of meaning-production through dialogue with a recognizable structural-semantic plot-type whereas a pure typological relationship of prefiguration and recurrence is not realized.

## THE MATTER OF THE GUEST

Particularly interesting is the discussion of guests, hospitality and the exchange of 'goods'. A wonderful exegesis of uses of the term *gestr* ('guest') is offered (pp. 53–58, 62–83). This includes a review of all cases in which a disguised Odin uses simply 'Gestr' as a pseudonym – which is surprisingly almost never, and is in fact only in stories 2–3 of this study. It is further revealed that copies of the text of story 2 are not consistent in using *gestr* as a proper name rather than a common noun, while story 3 is not preserved elsewhere. The structural plot-type thus becomes central to correlating a visitor called 'Guest' with Odin rather than because he is marked by use of an Odin-name (pp. 55–56). This analysis would have been strengthened by extending of the survey of *gestr* to its use as a name by disguised Odinic visitors in different contexts and examining the degree to which it is generally interchangeable with Odin-names within that motif (cf. pp. 63–64). The discussion of legal inheritance rights related to the property of a guest who dies (as in stories 1 and 4) explores the possibility that the guest's narrative 'goods' will also pass to

the host with material properties (esp. p. 68). This is an intriguing possibility that has the potential to offer new understanding of how some oral texts were viewed in this society.

## **NARRATIVE WORLDS VERSUS CONFLICTED CURIOSITIES**

A particularly interesting perspective is offered on the connection of intangible ‘goods’ (e.g. narratives) connected with temporal disorder and material artefacts (relics) or features of the landscape. Material objects and the landscape are considered to have “irruptive potential” (p. 144). Consequently, famous pre-Christian kings in their mounds become “dangerous” “by being named and having narrative attached to them” (p. 145). This offers a very interesting approach to embedded narratives. A tension develops as this irruptive potential is extended from the narrative world to ethnographic reality, especially when the correlation between intangible and tangible objects is entangled by the developing use of metaphor in the study (esp. pp. 145–146, 180–181). Within narration, irruption is characterized by elocution opening the unknown, unfamiliar or ideologically unaccepted. Focus remains on only one side of this as an interactive social process: ‘irruptions’ are seen from the perspective of Christians who do not know/accept. It would have been nice to see discussion extend to consideration of those who do know, those living with narratives of a pagan past and capable of the counter-role in an ‘irruptive’ dialogue. This is part of a tendency to approach the texts as meaningful expressions without extending consideration to the texts as reflecting outcomes of choices from alternatives to produce strategic expressions in relation to other expressions in discourse. The interpretation of the stories as expressions of “a very conscious and conflicted curiosity” about the pre-Christian past and its narrative goods (p. 189) should be situated in a broader social discourse of conflicting and contested views. The interpretation may be valid, but it remains unclear to what degree the conflict surrounding curiosity reflects social rather than personal views, and how individuals’ selection, representation and manipulation of earlier manuscript texts and cultural goods participate in the negotiation of social attitudes. This discussion builds up to a noteworthy interpretation that “Óðinn symbolizes exactly the problematic around antiquarian curiosity” (p. 190), which offers a valuable contribution to understanding aspects of this polysemic figure in the written discourses of medieval Iceland. This interpretation of Odin as “the ideal antiquarian” (p. 191) produces interesting questions regarding the role of this sort of potential identity model in scriptoria where antiquarian interests were actively explored.

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